

HENRY THOREAU
AND THE REALMS OF TIME

(Presidential Address by Edwin Way Teale
at the Annual Meeting of The Thoreau
Society, Concord, Massachusetts,
Saturday, July 12, 1958.)

For many of us who have found in the writings of Henry Thoreau something of special and lasting importance, there is some day, some hour we can recall that is linked in our minds with a memorable first encounter with the outlook and spirit of the author of Walden. As for myself I can remember that moment well.

It was the year after I graduated from college—where Emerson enjoyed a whole semester course of his own and Henry Thoreau was rarely mentioned at all. That June I set out in a rowboat with a classmate to row the 400 miles down the Ohio River from Louisville, Kentucky, to the Mississippi. At the end of the second day my friend thought of some pressing matter that took him elsewhere and I continued rowing alone for the remaining 300 miles.

Somewhere along the way I stopped at a small river town whose name I cannot remember. On its main street I found a hole-in-the-wall bookshop. There, on a dusty table littered with second-hand volumes, I came upon a small, pocket-sized book of the thoughts of Henry David Thoreau. Rowing down the river in the days that followed, I would pull out into the middle of the stream and let the boat drift with the current for half an hour at a time, reading as I drifted—a process of education that rivals in attractiveness those long-ago strolls of philosophers and students amid the Athenian groves.

It was there that I came upon a paragraph in the writings of Thoreau that kept returning to my mind in succeeding years. For each of us, no doubt, some different facet of Thoreau's many-sided character made its first appeal. For me it was these sentences from a letter to his Worcester friend, Harrison Blake:

"I have just put another stick into my stove...I suppose I have burned up a pretty good-sized tree tonight--and for what? I settled with Mr. Tarbell for it the other day; but that wasn't the final settlement. I got off cheaply from him. At last, one will say, "Let me see how much wood did you burn, Sir?" And I shall shudder to think that the next question will be, "What did you do while you were warm?"

Those words were set down four months and ten days after the publication of Walden--and six days before Christmas--on December 19, 1854. They express that lifelong concern for time and the use of time that is ever-present in the writings of Thoreau.

Some of his finest sentences concern time. "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and

detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbly with stars."

Those who have read through the fifth volume of the Journal will recall an amusing entry on March 28, 1853. "My Aunt Maria asked me to read the life of Dr. Chalmers, which however I did not promise to do. Yesterday, Sunday, she was heard through the partition shouting to my Aunt Jane, who is deaf, "Think of it! He stood half an hour today to hear the frogs croak, and he wouldn't read the life of Chalmers."

In few things did Henry Thoreau differ more from most of his fellow townsmen than in his ideas on the use of time. To them he seemed loafing, not applying himself, wasting his time. To him they were wasting their time, frittering away their lives on detail, dying without ever having lived.

"It is time now," he wrote in his Journal several years before he borrowed an ax and hewed out the timbers for his Walden hut, "that I begin to live". At Walden, as has been pointed out innumerable times, his expenses were only 27 cents a week. Yet, later on, looking back on his experiment beside the pond, he noted: "It has not been my design to live cheaply, but only to live as I could, not devoting much time to getting a living."

A year ago in June I returned to the college where that eventful rowboat trip had its inception to receive an honorary degree. The Commencement Address was given by a leading American industrialist. The theme of that address was this: Business has a stake in education. Why? Because the educated man is educated to have more wants than the uneducated man.

I am sure that if Henry Thoreau had been present on that occasion this idea would have been a subject for thought on his solitary rambles about Concord as an inspector of snowstorms or in keeping an appointment with a beech. And it should be a subject for thought by us today. "If my wants should be increased," he noted in the second volume of his Journal, "the labor required to supply them would become a drudgery." And again: "It is hard to have a Southern overseer; it is worse to have a Northern one; but it is worst of all when you are yourself the slave-driver." Surely there is some better investment for time than straining to support an endless multiplication of artificially-stimulated wants.

We learn early, if we learn at all, that if we do this we can't do that. The unending problem is how to spend our time. The old expression, "spending time," is valid. We spend our hours like coins and what we choose to buy is of fundamental concern. Time can be spent but it cannot be hoarded. It cannot be stretched nor compressed nor held in abeyance. Technological advances, saving us time in some ways, take an increased toll of our time in others. We could wander about doing other things

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while we listened to the radio; TV demands our undivided attention. In the realm of time as well as in the realm of finance there is the problem of inflation. Things seem to cost more in time, too.

Last July, when the Society was meeting here, I was in the midst of a 25,000-mile trip through some thirty states of the Union. Everywhere I went I found the world spinning the webs of greater complication. The very week of the meeting I encountered a superhighway sign that read: "To make a left turn make two right turns." You and I want to enjoy Walden Pond. And what happens? We find ourselves fighting to preserve a pond to enjoy. If the world is too much with us now consider the fact that the population of the United States will be 10,000 greater at the end of this meeting than it was at the beginning. It is increasing at the average rate of 5,000 an hour.

Thoreau had his distractions. But he had no power lawnmowers outside his windows, no jet planes above his roof, no ringing telephones, no rock-and-roll radio, no bang-bang-bang westerns on TV. The world in the intervening years has devised a thousand ways for distracting us, for draining away our time. "Killing time" is no longer a necessary pursuit. It is killed for us. "Ask me for a certain number of dollars if you will," Thoreau wrote, "but do not ask me for my afternoons." Each year the problem of having a broad margin to our lives becomes more difficult. Who has not felt, on occasions, like a man in a library surrounded by thousands of volumes with time to read but a few? And, I might add, there are moments when we feel as though the library were on fire and we had time to grab only a single volume.

Thoreau said he went to Walden because he was afraid when he came to die he might discover he had never lived. What is living? What is the highest use of our time, the wisest expenditure of our hours? Everyone has his own answer. A few years ago I was walking down Fifth Avenue with the President of a New York advertising firm. He said: "At last I have discovered what we were put on earth for". I said I would be most interested to know. He explained in all seriousness: "We were put on earth for one thing, to get the best of the other fellow before he can get the best of us. And we have only one chance, one life, in which to do it!"

That, I am very sure, would not have been the answer of the author of Walden. But what would his answer have been? What were his ideas about the best use of time? The question of the hour always is: "What are we trading our lives for now?" What did he consider of foremost importance in the investment of his time? One thing, emphasized by his words and acts, was spending a good many of his hours away from the distractions of society amid the basic realities of nature. "I think," he wrote, "I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least--and it is commonly more than that--sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields absolutely free from all worldly engagements". But in these walks Henry Thoreau did infinitely more than saunter

During those hours out-of-doors the great events were his thoughts, the epochs, as he said, of his life. He set his traps for facts and ideas. And he cured and stored their pelts with care. But above all, it seems to me, a clew to Thoreau's outlook on the highest employment of time is contained in his penetrating observation that man's inventions and efforts are mainly devoted to finding improved means to unimproved ends.

We are still going around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar--only we are going faster. In Thoreau's day the rush of men was toward the goldfields of the west. "The whole enterprise of this nation," he commented, "is not an upward but a westward one." Today, with rockets and satellites and plans to reach Mars and the Moon, our progress is upward--at least in a physical sense. Yet we feel worse off than before, more unsafe, because improved means to unimproved ends have been so awesomely advanced.

The development of a better rocket to reach the Moon or Mars is a great enterprise. It stirs the imagination. But the development of better people to go to Mars should stir it more. It is a nobler goal. It is well to remember that, in the fairy tale, it was the Ogre who wore the Seven-League Boots. Going farther and faster without improving the purposes for getting there at all is merely another demonstration of improved means to unimproved ends. If we fly to another planet carrying flame-throwers and poison gas and atom bombs to burn and choke and disintegrate into submission any possible inhabitants we find, we will be employing means fantastically advanced to achieve ends no different from those of Attala the Hun. That portion of our time that is concerned with improving the ends--not merely the means--is, in the Thoreauvian sense, the most highly employed of all.

Specifically how we live from day to day, the enterprises we engage in, how we spend our coins of time, these are things we must decide for ourselves. But always we are faced with the same problem that Thoreau confronted in the realms of time. Today we may be warmed by fuel oil instead of wood. We may not have to put another stick in the stove. Instead we set up the thermostat. But even so, even today in a world so changed, our responsibility is the same for the use of our time. The same voice speaks to us, asking the same question: "What did you do while you were warm?"

SAVE WALDEN COMMITTEE REPORT

Gladys E. H. Hosmer, Chairman

At the 1957 annual meeting the following committee was appointed colloquially called the Save Walden Committee. Edwin Way Teale and Walter Harding, ex-officio, Mrs. Herbert B. Hosmer, Chairman, Mrs. Caleb Wheeler, Secretary and Truman Nelson, John Nickols, Randolph Jackson, Roland Robbins and Rev. Arthur Schoenfeldt.

After conferences with the Concord Board of Selectmen in their office and with Representatives Eaton & De Normandie of the General Court, the County Commissioners and others at pond-side it was determined to engage legal counsel, Mr. Frederick Fisher of the

firm of Hale & Dorr, and seek an injunction to halt the building of a 100 foot bathhouse and a hard-top road at the devastated area at the new beach site. Further conferences were held in the office of the County Commissioners in the East Cambridge Court House. The committee itself held innumerable pre-tracted sessions. Counsel for the Save Walden Committee appeared at a hearing before Judge Dewing and obtained a temporary injunction after the Judge had made a personal inspection at Walden.

The resultant world-wide publicity astonished even the Committee itself. A single item in "Trade Winds" in the Saturday Review brought in more than 200 letters. A portion of the publicity file is on exhibition in the vestry. Obviously it was necessary to raise funds to meet legal expenses. The Committee sent out 1000 appeal letters to members of the Thoreau Society and other friends of Walden. The response was gratifying, especially from Concord itself but the sum realized is not nearly sufficient to see the case to its conclusion as the treasurers' figures show.

Following the granting of the injunction the matter was referred to Judge Forte of the Superior Court. Judge Forte asked for the appointment of a Master and Auditor to preside at a hearing in the points of law involved. The Committee's contention that the terms of the 1922 deed of the Walden land to the Commonwealth has been violated. Consequently, a hearing was held before a Master, Nelson B. Vanderhoof, at which witnesses for both sides gave their testimony. This dragged on for a ten day period for which the Society's share of the court stenographers fee came to the staggering total of \$828.00. The County Commissioners were represented by three lawyers each of whom had the right of cross-examination. Briefs were filed by both sides together with the testimony early in June. To date the Master has not rendered his decision.

Present prospects are that when Judge Forte receives the Master's decision he may refer the case to the Supreme Judicial Court, or either side according to the judgement will appeal to the latter body.

Meanwhile at the Committee's request Sen. William E. Hays of Waltham, and Reps' John Eaton, Jr., & James De Normandie filed a bill in the General Court to transfer the custody of the Walden Pond State Reservation from the Middlesex County Commissioners to the State Department of Natural Resources, an agency staffed by competent professional personnel. The Committee sent a letter advocating the passage of the bill to all members of the legislature. This bill was defeated in the Senate by the narrow vote of 15 to 14 and failed for reconsideration. A similar bill will be resubmitted in 1959 when it is hoped that it will have bipartisan support.

I can assure you that your committee has worked hard, often at a real sacrifice of time and money. I hope that our efforts have met with the approval of the Society and that we will merit your confidence in our determination to see the case through to its ultimate conclusion. Whatever the outcome we feel that we have accomplished a

great deal not only for Walden itself but for all other places of natural beauty, literary and historic association, and generous people who want their gifts used for specific purposes.

THE 1958 ANNUAL MEETING . . .

The 1958 annual meeting of the Thoreau Society was held in the First Parish Church in Concord, Mass., on Saturday, July 12th, at 10:30 a.m., Edwin Way Teale presiding. The secretary's report, as published in Bulletin 60, was accepted. The following treasurer's report was accepted:

On hand, July 5, 1957	583.18
Income	732.05

Expenses	
Annual meeting	104.60
Printing	508.83
Postage	166.25
Misc.	56.61
Total	836.29

On hand, July 8, 1958	478.94
For the Save Walden Committee:	
Income	4547.57
Expenses	4598.28
In debt	50.71

The following two amendments to the by-laws of the society were adopted unanimously: (1) The presidents of this society shall be ex-officio life members of the board of directors, above and beyond the stipulated six members of the board. (2) Sustaining members of the society shall consist of those members who contribute more than one dollar but less than twenty-five dollars to the treasury of the society. They will thus be entitled to a membership of one fiscal year in the society.

The nominating committee (Mrs. Leslie Anderson, Mr. Ralph Chapman, chairman) proposed the following slate of officers: president, J. Lyndon Shanley, Evanston, Ill.; vice-president, Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass.; secretary-treasurer, Walter Harding, Geneseo, New York, all for terms of one year; Mrs. Edmund Fenn, Concord, and Robert Needham, Concord, members of the executive committee for terms of three years. The slate was unanimously accepted. Mr. Teale announced the appointment of T.L. Bailey of Cleveland, Ohio, and Anton Kovar of Arlington, Mass., as members of the nominating committee for next year.

Mrs. Herbert Hosmer delivered a report on the work of the Save Walden Committee. (See above.) Mrs. Charles Edwards moved that the Save Walden Committee be commended and thanked for its activities of the past year and be instructed to continue for the forthcoming year. This motion was accepted.

Mr. Teale delivered the presidential address on "Henry Thoreau and the Realms of Time." (See text elsewhere in this bulletin).

Prof. Frederick T. McGill of Rutgers University at Newark delivered a paper on "Thoreau and Channing" which will be a part of his forthcoming biography of Channing.

Truman Nelson, of the Save Walden Committee, read from the proofs of a forthcoming article in NATION on the court hearings over the Walden Pond issue. Upon motion of Robert Wheeler, it was voted that each member of the Thoreau Society be urged to donate or solicit at least ten dollars to continue the efforts of the Save Walden Committee.

Luncheon was served in the First Parish vestry where there was also an exhibition of Thoreau relics. In the afternoon members were invited to tour the Orchard House, Wayside, the wildflower garden of Mrs. Edmund Fenn, the Antiquarian Society, and a

special Thoreau exhibit at the Concord Free Public Library.

Saturday evening the Save Walden Committee, Mrs. Herbert Hosmer presiding, reported on their activities of the past year at a meeting held in the First Parish vestry. A highlight of the meeting was a series of "before and after" color slides showing the devastation at Walden Pond.

NOTES AND QUERIES . . .

Among the unusual ways of raising money to aid the Save Walden Fund: Prof. Carleton Wells of the University of Michigan circulated the Michigan members of the Council of Teachers of English; Prof. Russell Nye of Michigan State University and Prof. Kenneth Cameron of Trinity College asked for contributions from their American literature classes. The responses in all three cases were amazingly large. Mrs. Helen Morrison sold copies of her THOREAU TODAY at the annual meeting, as did Roland Robbins copies of his DISCOVERY AT WALDEN, and Leonard Kleinfeld, his THOREAU CHRONOLOGY. All three turned their entire proceeds over to the fund. S. Matthews of Romford, Essex, England, sent an early edition of Shakespeare which was auctioned at the annual meeting and brought \$40 for the fund.

The cost of printing this bulletin was in part covered by the life membership of Mr. Harold Swenson of Clifton, N.J. Life membership is \$25.00.

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Although there have been a number of studies of Thoreau's humor published, this is by far the best and the most thorough. Wisely, the emphasis is placed upon Thoreau's use of humor as a technique of criticism, for he rarely used humor for its own sake. And as such, the book makes an excellent survey of Thoreau's criticism of church, state, education, business, etc., as well as a sort of anthology of Thoreau's humorous remarks. It is well that at last we are beginning to get some worthwhile studies of Thoreau's techniques as a writer. And this, in its particular field, is the best one yet.

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I am indebted to the following for information used in this bulletin: R.Adams, T. Bailey, F.Babcock, A.Bell, M.Campbell, L. Cash, W.Cummings, G.Genztner, G.Hosmer, C. Jammer, R.Kirk, A.Kovar, W. Moiles, G. Megathlin, P.Miller, N.Lehrman, E.Smith, R.Schaedle, G.Streib, R.Stowell, E.Teale, J.Tobin, R.Wheeler, A.Wesley, G.Wright, E. Wilson, and H.Zahniser. Please keep the secretary informed of new Thoreau items as they appear.

The Thoreau Society, Inc. is an informal organization of students and followers of Henry David Thoreau. Its bulletins are issued quarterly; its booklets, occasionally. Annual meetings are held in Concord each July. Officers of the society are J. Lyndon Shanley, Evanston, Ill., president; Mrs. Herbert Hosmer, Concord, Mass., vice-president; and Walter Harding, secretary-treasurer. Annual membership is one dollar; sustaining membership, two to twenty-four dollars; life membership, twenty-five dollars. Communications concerning membership or publications should be addressed to the secretary:

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